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ABSTRACT

Teaching nonnative speakers of English to listen for the discriminating nuances of the language is an important but neglected aspect of American English language training. A discriminating listening process follows a sequence of distinguishing phonemes, supra segmental phonemes, morphemes, and syntax. Certain phonetic differences can be noted between other languages and English. Training nonnative speakers to listen discriminatively for phonemes may be accomplished by first having the student listen to the phonemes and observe the instructor producing the sounds in isolation. Next should be to have the listener reflect the sounds simultaneously with the speaker without substitution or distortion of the phonemes presented. The next step should be discriminating the appropriate sound within the word's initial, medial, and final positions. Training in discriminative listening is also necessary for comprehension and understanding. When working to improve a foreign speaker's intelligibility, no more than three sounds per session should be worked on, but in all positions of words and sentences. Once the problem sounds are produced correctly, the learner can progress to phonetically balanced passages. Accurate pronunciation and correct use of intonation are stressed in this final stage. Although English is classified as an "uninflected language," in American English inflection is used to indicate questioning, humor, sarcasm, and certainty, as well as emotion. Examples from Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish illustrate some of the methods for discriminative listening. (NKA)

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What a Nonnative Speaker of American English Needs to Learn Through Listening

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What a Nonnative Speaker of American English Needs to Learn Through Listening

by Lori Macias and Bob Bohlken

The American English language has approximately 600,000 words compared with French which has 150,000 and Russian with 130,000.[1] However, anyone who has command of the 3000 most frequently used English words has an understanding of 95% of the words an average American speaks;[2] that is, if, the person is aware of the nuances indicated by the pronunciation, semantic and syntax characteristics of the American language. Listening for these discriminating nuances is an important but neglected aspect of training nonnative speakers in American English. Research shows that learners who come to the second language as adults are unable to recognize the differences between accented and unaccented language without listening training.[3] It is our purpose to provide a listening process and procedure which will enhance the learning of English as a second language.

The American English language contains forty four phonemes. That number is above the average number of twenty-five phonemes found among other languages of the world. Native Hawaiian has only twelve phonemes.[4]

Each of the forty four phonemes in American English has distinctive production features or characteristics that are important in the understanding and production of words or symbolic concepts. These characteristics include the voiced (aspirated) or unvoiced (unaspirated) phonemes, the energy (plosive, fricative, nasal, affricative) nature of the phoneme and the placement or

closure of production of the phoneme. The written counterpart of phonemes in the American English language, the alphabet, has only twenty six characters to express the forty four phonemes.[5] Because the languages of other cultures do not use certain phones common in American English, special training is required in listening for these sounds before attempts are made by the individual to produce these phones. Phonetic differences vary with cultures. But certain phonemic differences can be noted in their languages and American English.

Specific native languages give rise to certain phoneme production error patterns that can be noted when the individual is speaking American English. According to Compton (1991)[6] the Japanese speakers produced a /p/ for /b/ 75% of the time, 81% produced /k/ for /g/ 81% of the time, /d/ for /t/ 69% of the time and /l/ for /r/ 56% of the time in final positions of words. Among Spanish speakers, approximately 61% produced /ʒ/ for /t /and /ʃ/ for /tʃ/, and /ʒ/ for /dʒ/ in final word positions. Japanese has no true "L" sound; therefore, when listening to American English, Japanese speakers assimilate the /l/ for the nearest indigenous sound /r/. The following consonant blends and vowels are also difficult for Japanese speakers to produce /θr/, /kl/, /pl/, /i/, /ae/, /ʌ/ , /ɔɪ/ and /ɜɪ/ with each sound being produced incorrectly at least 40% of the time. The Chinese language does not have /k/; therefore Chinese speakers inflect and stress without purpose the vowel sounds of American English words containing /k/. These production error patterns can be attributed to the individual's unfamiliarity with the phonemes and the

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inability to discriminate those phonemes when listening.

Training nonnative speakers of American English to listen discriminatively for phonemes may be accomplished by first having the student listen to the phonemes and observe the instructor producing these sounds in isolation. The next logical step should be to have the listener reflect the sounds simultaneously with the speaker without substitution or distortion of the phonemes presented. The next step should be discriminating the appropriate sound within the word's initial, medial and final positions.

Training in discriminative listening is necessary for not only appropriate production, but also for comprehension and understanding. Unfortunately, second language education emphasizes the "see and say" method which bypasses listening for phoneme discrimination. One commercial program, Comptons P-ESL, claims that ". . .research reveals that the 'accented' sounds of English constitute a system of interrelated pronunciation patterns which are determined largely by the speaker's native language...and the errors represent a small number of systematic patterns which are the actual cause of pronunciation difficulty."[7] This difficulty is alleviated by beginning with discriminating listening.

When working to improve a foreign speaker's intelligibility no more than three sounds per session should be worked on, but in all positions of words and sentences. Once, the problem sounds are produced correctly, the learner can progres to phonetically balanced passages. Accurate pronunciation and correct use of intonation are stressed in this final stage.

The following language sample was taken from a Japanese-speaking college senior while he was telling a story:

t
One day last month Jessica went to the library finding
w s
some book for her research paper. First of all she went
to the catalogue section and finding the books numbers
t s t s
and authors name she want. That she wanted. Finally
t s s
she find the book that she wanted. So she went to the
s
second floor and searching for the book she was looking
s
for she. She looked through a few books and finally she
t s
find a book that she wanted.

/ = ommission
t, w, or s = substitution

In the area of pronunciation the following mistakes were noted: substitution of /t/ for /th/, /w/ for /r/, /h/ for /sh/, /d/ for /th/, /s/ for /sh/ and omission of /g/, /n/, /h/, /sh/. In the area of syntax, incorrect verb usage was noted, for example "finding" for "find," "find" for "found," and "searching" for "searched." In the area of morphology, omission of plural /s/ in "books" was also noted.

Along with the phoneme assimilation is the supra-segmental phonemes confusion. The paralanguage elements of stress, pitch/tone, and rhythm add to the listening comprehension difficulties of American English by nonnative speakers as these vary across languages. English generally streses the first syllable unlike Spanish, for example, where words have the stressed accent on the next-to-last syllable and French, which accents the end of the word.[8]

In American English, inflection is used to indicate questioning, humor, sarcasm, and certainty, as well as emotion. In many other languages, voice inflection is used only to convey emotion and not the intended meaning of the expressed thought phrase. Both the Yoruba and Madrine language groups indicate emotion by inflection but not verbal meaning of the thought phrase.

All one has to do to appreciate the variation of rate and rhythm among languages is to listen. One would think that the rapid rate of Spanish speaker indicates anger or intense involvement, but in reality the conversation is congenial and the rate lacks emotional significance.

To determine the importance of supra-segmental phonemes in the nonnative American speaker's understanding, section 4 of the Watson-Barker Listening Test[9], the most used standardized listening test, was administered to twenty nonnative speakers (male and female) and twenty native speakers of American English. The results show a significant difference at the .01 level. The mean score for the native language group was 14.4 compared with 9.8 for non native language group.

The nonnative American English speaker also needs to be trained in discriminating listening for morphology and syntax. A morpheme is a linguistic unit that has semantic meaning. There are two types--free (a word) and bound (phonemes added to a word to alter its meaning). A common problem in understanding another language is the inability to recognize the nuances created by adding sounds to a word to change the word's meaning in regard

to these areas: tense--"dance" to "danced"; number--"human" to "humans"; function--"play" to "playing"; possession--"Bill" to "Bill's" (which relies on inflection and context for recognition); and degree--"big," "bigger," "biggest."

Unsophisticated listeners to a second language will miss the intended change in meaning created by the bound morpheme or "inflected" word. The nonnative American English student needs to learn to listen discriminatively to the various types of common bound morphemes in isolation: "s," "ed," "ing," "en," "er," "est," "ment," "ly," "able," "ise;" prefixes "un," "be," "bi," "en" "pre," "anti," "mis." After fulfilling the prescribed behavioral objective for recognition in isolation, the morphemes are deliberately used by the trainer in both prefix and suffix positions of multi morphemic words.

Along with phonemic and morphemic discriminating listening, those listening to American English must be aware of the syntax of the language or the way the words are tied together. For example, consider the following popular children's story.

> Want pown term, dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter mutter inner ladle cordage honor itch offer lodge dock florist. Disc ladle gull orphan worry ladle cluck wetter putty ladle rat hut, and fur disc raisin, pimple caulder Ladle Rat Rotten Hut. Wan moaning Ladle Rate Rotten Hut's mutter set. Heresy ladle basking winsome burden barter end shock her kook keys.

You probably were able to pick up on the message in a short period of time. English is classified as a "non inflected" language. The function of a word is indicated by its position in the sentence rather than the word's ending (in most cases). The nonnative American English speaker must realize through listening

that English thought phrases contain a noun and a verb in that order. "Something is" or Something does" is the rule of English and the listener needs to anticipate that pattern, unlike French, for example, in which the verb may be found anywhere within the sentence. Another element of syntax is that English subordinates ideas through the use of subordinated clauses; whereas, many other languages do not have complex sentences.

We recommend having nonnative American speakers first listen to short, simple sentences containing active verbs and specific nouns while avoiding pronouns, adverbs and prepositions, metaphors and the subjunctive mood.[10] These more sophisticated elements need to be developed after the basics are established. From this starting point work up to imitating complex sentences and completing on that structure. For example, close the following complex sentences:

"When I was eighteen..."

"Since Bayo has tried..."

"After Tom rested..."

The most difficult aspects of listening to a "second language are in the recognition and interpretation of the presuppositions, the deictic term (you, there now), the anomalies, the metaphors and the idioms."[11]

From our perspective The key to learning and speaking American English as a second language is training in discriminating listening. The process follows a sequence of distinguishing phonemes, supra segmental phonemes, morphemes, and syntax. Learning a language naturally begins with listening.

ENDNOTES

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